

Radical Hospitality  
Matthew 2:1-12  
January 4, 2009  
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Dear Dick Clark--what SHALL I preach about?--there are so many choices for today: New Year's Resolutions, Epiphany, the visitation of the Magi, or the first sermon in the series of the Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations. This book, written by Bishop Robert Schnase, of the Missouri Conference, has taken the United Methodist church by storm this past year. We have asked the leadership of St. John to read it, Monday Morning Women will be studying it the next five weeks, we will be leading a discussion of each topic following the Wednesday Night Suppers and More, and of course this sermon series. Briefly, the premise is that if congregations practice Radical Hospitality, persons will come into the church and if Worship is Passionate, they will want to know more about the faith through Intentional Faith Development which will result in responding to God's love through Risk-taking Mission and Service which will be supported through Extravagant Generosity.

What is Radical Hospitality and how does it differ from hospitality in general? Let's look briefly at today's scripture. Mary practiced radical hospitality when she welcomed these strange men from far away lands into her home. The fact that they were Gentiles helps us to understand God's inclusive love--Jesus came for the whole world--not only for the people to whom the promise was made. That was radical.

Sometimes we have an opportunity to welcome persons who are different from us to our church. Once I was interviewing for a position in a church in New Jersey and one of the women asked if we had any people of color in the church in Ann Arbor where I was serving at the time. She went on to say, "we had a family visit here once, but then they found their own church." I would like to think that the church they found wasn't necessarily one primarily of their own ethnicity, but rather one which welcomed All Persons as members of the family of God. Mary welcomed the Wise Men to her home--and received the gifts they brought. I believe that when we welcome all to our house of worship, we receive many and varied gifts that they bring with them. We are a more complete representation of the Body of Christ when we include others.

Radical hospitality has four main aspects: invitation, welcome, inclusion, and support. We hope that you **invite** people to come to St. John. The other day, I was speaking with the person who works at my Curves and she asked me which church I served. When I answered, St. John, she said, "Oh yes, someone told me what a good church you have and that I should visit sometime." I said, "that's great, we've been encouraging our members to invite others."

She said, "Oh this person doesn't go to your church--she is a Catholic, but she said your church is really good." Good for the Catholics. On the last Sunday of this month, January 25, we are having another Andrew Sunday. Think about your neighbors, family, friends, families you know through your kid's activities. Are there those who don't have a faith community? We have

enclosed cards that you can use as invitations. Why don't you make a New Year's resolution to invite at least one person or family to church this year?

Or maybe you could make a resolution to be more welcoming to those whom others invite or who come on their own. Bishop Schnase says that sometimes, we are so good at loving one another that we forget to reach out to those we don't know. Do you know everyone who is in your row or in front or behind you? Before you have that conversation with someone you already know, spend just a minute greeting someone you don't already know. It matters not if they are already active at St. John--if you don't know them you will have broadened your St. John connections.

As you know, the mission statement for St. John is "to be a welcoming family joyfully sharing God's light." That mission statement addresses the first two aspects of Radical Hospitality: invitation and welcoming.

The mission statement for the denomination, "to make disciples for Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world" addresses the other aspects: including and supporting. After we have invited and welcomed others into our fellowship, we encourage them to become active in the church--maybe by attending a class, an event, or service project and we support one another throughout our faith journeys.

If we believe that our faith in God enhances our lives and that our involvement in our church is worthwhile, why wouldn't we want to share that with others? Inevitably, we will all have times of crisis and the support of a faith community can make all the difference. There are those who are part of our community today who first came as a result of a crisis. Perhaps there was a death in the family and since they didn't have a church, a friend suggested St. John--and they have grown to become an active member. As I was looking through the attendance sheets from Christmas Eve, I discovered people who were here because their children attend New Horizons--now and ten years ago. I saw the names of some who decided to attend after being here recently for Carol Kajikawa's funeral. There are people who have come to us through our Boy Scout Troop, the Health Fair, the Rummage Sale, or the Fall Craft Festival. The point being, whenever we are here, we have an opportunity to be welcoming and including.

As people come into our fellowship they will experience a community of support in times of need. This week I had a thank you card from one of our members who spent Christmas in the hospital expressing gratitude for prayers and meal support. How sad to think of those who are alone during times of need because we haven't offered Radical Hospitality to extend an invitation and welcome to everyone to come into God's presence with us.

All are welcome and this is no better lived out in our church than at the Eucharist or Lord's Supper where we practice an open table. All are welcome at St. John and all are welcome to the Lord's Table. It is up to each of us to invite those who are not in Christian fellowship somewhere else, to join us so that we can experience God's grace and be challenged to become Disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.